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Ways To

OUT-



Always look
for ways to
strengthen
and expand
your marketing
horizons, and
stay ahead of
the competition.

- MARKET

The Competition

BY JOHN GRAHAM



Out-marketing competitors is easy, if you do it right. It takes a combination of work and savvy, but the results can be positive. Frankly, the competition often makes it unusually easy. They talk about what they are going to do, but never get around to doing much. They're successful at missing marketing opportunities.

Not everyone misses. For example, a 44-store dry-cleaning chain responded to requests for submissions for family business of the year and for community service. Detailed proposals were prepared and submitted, and the company took top honors in each one. This brought them widespread recognition and additional opportunities.

While the possibilities are limitless, here are several marketing ideas that can help you out-market the competition.

Put your marketing under the microscope. Review everything. That means all facets of your marketing activities. Whether it's advertising, letters, memos, e-bulletins, newsletters, press releases and so forth, ask yourself, "Is this about our company or is it about our customers?" The focus should be squarely on "them" rather than "us." If it isn't, change it!

Get a grip on the customer. This means thinking like a customer. Seems obvious, doesn't it? If you were selling something, why wouldn't you try to get inside the customer's head? After looking at recent GM ads, you might wonder what they're thinking. Chevy ads focus on interior space, mileage and OnStar, while Buick highlights a smooth ride. Is all that on target? If the "Cash for Clunkers" program is any indication, it isn't. Consumers want value for their dollar. By the way, GM isn't alone.

There's just too much distraction that keeps us from seeing the world through the customer's eyes.

Watch out for no-appeal perks. Just giving things to customers, including most so-called value-added "stuff," can backfire. It may send the message that you don't really understand what they want. If it doesn't have value for the customer, don't do it.

Get the emotions going. Facts can be helpful, but they don't translate into action. Reebok gets the idea with their recent cable ads for women's EasyTone shoes and its compelling message, "Better legs and a better butt with every step." The ad has both men and women talking, a sure sign that it hit an emotional target.

If you were selling something, why wouldn't you try to get inside the customer's head?

Sketchers' Shape-ups for men aim at the same hot spot – "get in shape without setting foot in a gym."

Be ubiquitous. "Daimler AG's two-year effort to win over U.S. drivers with a thrifty, plastic-clad minicar is running out of steam," notes BusinessWeek. After a hot start, ForTwo sales stalled. Was it the car or an inadequate marketing budget? The ForTwo smart car was a new concept, and it needed to be seen and promoted in every metropolitan area. It's an example of how un-



derpowered marketing gets you nowhere.

Power up your social media skills. Look for sites that seem to fit your objectives, and focus on one or two to start. Join the groups that are right for you and expand your connections. Then stay with it. Make yourself part of the community by posting helpful information regularly.

Seek presentation opportunities. Organizations look for presenters who can offer timely information and who won't serve up an infomercial. If you're an interesting speaker capable of delivering an applause-worthy presentation, you have opportunities and an edge. It's a great way for prospects to get acquainted with you.

Piggyback on hot news. A law firm specializing in divorces responded immediately to the Tiger Woods story with a "local angle" – just what the press was looking for. More than 40 media outlets picked up the story across the country. This strategy always has a small window, so you need to act quickly.

Develop a prospect database. An inadequate prospect database thwarts the marketing efforts of most companies. It's impossible to communicate with pro-

spective customers and actively cultivate them unless you have complete and accurate contact information.

Communicate consistently in a variety of ways. No business can depend on only one or two ways to communicate with prospects and customers today. The goal is to bounce as many balls as possible: phone, email, texting, print and electronic newsletters, blogs and seminars. Not all at the same time, but in more than one way.

Sponsor a community relations program. Go beyond just giving money. Identify a community need and make it yours by integrating it into your marketing plan. Then it becomes an extension of your brand. The goal is to align your company and its resources with your community relations program.

Stick with facts. Much of what passes for marketing is mere opinion shrouded in "puff and fluff." Third-party surveys and solid research can help build credibility by dispelling doubt.

Give your website a redo. Old websites never die; they just stay old. Ill-conceived, poorly designed and company-focused, they need to be filled with excitement and customer appeal.

What value does your company bring to your customers and how do you know? Guessing isn't good enough. Give attention to what makes your company unique.

Share your knowledge. Every business possesses expertise, but few share what they know with customers. Yet, it's your knowledge that helps set you apart from the competition. Sharing what you know has the power to pull customers.

Build your brand. What does it stand for? How is it perceived by customers? What do they think about when they think about you? What value does your company bring to your customers and how do you know? Guessing isn't good enough. Give attention to what makes your company unique.

Create a marketing calendar. Marketing plans are important, but the place to start is with a marketing calendar: what's going to happen each week, month and so forth. Use it as a road map to stay on track.

Follow up on sales leads. Lead accountability is essential, since studies show that follow-up fails with 30% to 80% of leads from inquiries, requests for information, telephone calls and so on. They're ignored, thrown away, dismissed as unimportant or just fall through the cracks.


Avoid trite words and phrases. When everyone uses certain words and phrases, stay away from them. Watch out for these: "value" (prove it), "we have great people" (who says so?), "we care" (words are not reality), "your business is important to us" (is that why you give out 25-cent trinkets?), "We provide solutions" (what does that mean?). Such words are "high level abstractions" that don't mean anything to customers. Be descriptive and tell stories. That's what grabs customers.

Market bylined articles. Well-written, informative articles (not self-serving) that meet an editor's requirements are in demand for both print and online venues. They are a great way to demonstrate your ability to

communicate successfully.

Avoid subterfuge. The e-mail message is clear: "Ask for our free white paper on..." Then when you "click here," up pops a form, which instantly devalues the white paper. In fact, it's no longer "free," since the "price" is providing contact information. This sends the message to prospects that you're not an upfront business. If it's free, let the visitor get it now.

Why does your company deserve more business? Ford takes this question seriously by challenging itself and coming up with far-reaching changes in thinking and operations, including moving to smaller vehicles and a truly global platform. Your actions let customers know who you really are

If you've thought of other marketing activities to add to the list, that's good. Continually expanding our marketing horizons is what it's all about. It's the best way to out-market the competition. 

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